

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2020

Singapore

50
/100

PARTLY FREE

Political Rights**19** /40Civil Liberties**31** /60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

51 /100 ● Partly Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)



Overview

Singapore's parliamentary political system has been dominated by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and the family of current prime minister Lee Hsien Loong since 1959. The electoral and legal framework that the PAP has constructed allows for some political pluralism, but it constrains the growth of credible opposition parties and limits freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

Key Developments in 2019

- The Protection against Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) was adopted in May, giving government ministers the power to determine whether content is false and to order removals or corrections. The law, which was enacted despite objections from academics and civil society, had been invoked several times by year's end, including against the political opposition.
- The Electoral Boundaries Review Committee was appointed by the prime minister in August in preparation for the 2020 elections. The committee was tasked with reviewing and redrawing the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies—a process that has traditionally favored the ruling PAP.

Political Rights

A. Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

1 / 4

The government is led by a prime minister and cabinet formed by the party that controls the legislature. The current prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, has been in power since 2004 and secured a new mandate after the 2015 parliamentary elections.

While polling-day procedures are generally free of irregularities, numerous structural factors impede the development of viable electoral competition.

The president, whose role is largely ceremonial, is elected by popular vote for six-year terms, and a special committee is empowered to vet candidates. Under 2016 constitutional amendments on eligibility, none of Singapore's three main ethnic groupings (Malays, Chinese, and Indians or others) may be excluded from the presidency for more than five consecutive terms, and presidential candidates from the private sector, as opposed to senior officials with at least three years of service, must have experience leading a company with at least S\$500 million (US\$370 million) in shareholder equity. Only one candidate—Halimah Yacob, backed by the PAP—was declared eligible for the 2017 presidential election, making her the winner by default.

A2 0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

2/4

The unicameral Parliament elected in 2015 includes 13 members from single-member constituencies and 76 members from Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs). The top-polling party in each GRC wins all of its three to six seats, which has historically bolstered the majority of the dominant PAP. As many as nine additional, nonpartisan members can be appointed to Parliament by the president, and another nine can come from a national compensatory list meant to ensure a minimum of opposition representation. Members serve five-year terms, with the exception of appointed members, who serve for two and a half years.

In the 2015 elections, the PAP secured nearly 70 percent of the popular vote and 83 of the 89 elected seats. The largest opposition group, the Workers' Party (WP), retained the six elected seats it had won in 2011, but lost a seat it won in a 2013 by-election. Three compensatory seats were awarded to the opposition to achieve the minimum of nine.

Elections are largely free of fraud and other such irregularities, but they are unfair due to the advantages enjoyed by the incumbent party, including a progovernment

media sector, the GRC system, high financial barriers to electoral candidacy, and legal restrictions on free speech.

A3 0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

1 / 4

Singapore lacks an independent election commission; the country's Elections Department is a government body attached to the Prime Minister's Office. The secretary to the prime minister is the head of the Electoral Boundaries Review Committee, which is responsible for reviewing and redrawing the boundaries for electoral constituencies. The prime minister appointed the committee's members in August 2019 in preparation for the 2020 elections. In the past, the PAP-controlled boundaries process has ensured an advantage for the party. The new electoral districts for 2015 were announced just seven weeks before the elections. The electoral framework suffers from a number of other features—including the GRC system and the onerous eligibility rules for presidential candidates—that favor the PAP-dominated political establishment.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

2 / 4

Singapore has a multiparty political system, and a total of nine parties contested the last parliamentary elections in 2015. However, a variety of factors have helped to ensure the PAP's dominant position, including an electoral framework that favors the

incumbents, restrictions on political films and television programs, the threat of defamation suits, the PAP's vastly superior financial resources, and its influence over the mass media and the courts.

In October 2018, hearings began in lawsuits filed by two PAP-led town councils against a group of WP officials—including three sitting members of Parliament—who were accused of mismanaging public finances while the councils were under WP control. The expenses associated with the cases forced the defendants to solicit donations for a legal defense fund. The trial concluded in April 2019, and in October the High Court ruled that the three lawmakers were responsible for damages related to the mismanagement of the public funds, the total of which would be decided in a separate trial.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?

2/4

The PAP has governed without interruption since 1959. The opposition has made some progress in mounting stronger election campaigns over the last decade; opposition factions collectively put forward candidates for all 89 directly elected Parliament seats in 2015, a first since independence. However, the WP lost one seat compared with the outgoing Parliament, and the PAP managed to win a higher percentage of the popular vote than in 2011, indicating that the opposition is unlikely to secure a majority in the foreseeable future.

As of late 2019, some smaller opposition parties were considering an alliance to contest the 2020 elections. A number of new parties also formed ahead of the polls.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?

2/4

The corporatist structure of the economy creates dense ties between business and political elites that have been criticized as oligarchic in nature. These networks contribute to the PAP's political dominance.

Many senior government officials formerly served as military officers, and the military has a close relationship with the PAP, but it does not directly engage in politics.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?

2/4

Ethnic and religious minority groups have full voting rights, but critics—including academics and civil society organizations—have questioned whether the GRC system really achieves its stated aim of ensuring representation for minorities. Separately, the rules for presidential candidacy have been criticized for excluding non-Malays from the 2017 election. Malays are generally underrepresented in leadership positions.

Women remain underrepresented in senior government and political positions, though women candidates won 21 of the 89 directly elected Parliament seats in 2015, and the president who took office in 2017 is a woman. The cabinet as of 2019 included three women ministers. LGBT+ interest groups operate but do not have vocal representation in Parliament; open LGBT+ identity can be a barrier to election in practice.

C. Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?

2/4

Elected officials determine the policies of the government, but the PAP's political and institutional dominance ensures its victory at the polls, and the party leadership maintains discipline among its members. The constitution stipulates that lawmakers lose their seats if they resign or are expelled from the party for which they stood in elections. This inhibits Parliament's ability to serve as an effective check on the executive.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?

3/4

Singapore has been lauded for its lack of bribery and corruption. However, its corporatist economic structure entails close collaboration between the public and private sectors that may produce conflicts of interest. Lawmakers often serve on the boards of private companies, for example. The current prime minister's wife is the chief executive of Temasek Holdings, a government-linked corporation and sovereign wealth fund; the relationship has drawn accusations of nepotism and cronyism.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency?

2/4

The government provides limited transparency on its operations. The Singapore Public Sector Outcome Review is published every two years and includes metrics on the functioning of the bureaucracy; regular audits of public-sector financial processes are also made accessible to the public. However, other data, including key information on the status of the national reserves, are not made publicly available, and there is no freedom of information law giving citizens the right to obtain government records.

There is a lack of transparency surrounding the activities and salary of the prime minister's wife as the chief executive of Temasek Holdings.

In a move to increase transparency on monetary policy, the Monetary Authority of Singapore announced in May 2019 that it would release statistics on its foreign exchange intervention operations on a six-month aggregated basis beginning in July 2020.

Civil Liberties

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?

2/4

All domestic newspapers, radio stations, and television channels are owned by companies linked to the government. Editorials and news coverage generally support state policies, and self-censorship is common, though newspapers occasionally publish critical content. The government uses racial or religious tensions and the threat of terrorism to justify restrictions on freedom of speech. Media outlets, bloggers, and public figures have been subjected to harsh civil and criminal penalties for speech deemed to be seditious, defamatory, or injurious to religious sensitivities. Major online news sites must obtain licenses and respond to regulators' requests to remove prohibited content. However, foreign media and a growing array of online domestic outlets—including news sites and blogs—are widely consumed and offer alternative views, frequently publishing articles that are critical of the government or supportive of independent activism.

Among other ongoing legal cases against the media, in September 2019 the prime minister initiated a civil defamation suit against the editor of an alternative news website, *The Online Citizen*, over an article that allegedly made baseless claims about the prime minister and his family. The plaintiff demanded the article's removal, a

published apology, and a pledge not to publish any similar allegations. The suit was pending at year's end.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?

3/4

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion as long as its practice does not violate any other regulations, and most groups worship freely. However, religious actions perceived as threats to racial or religious harmony are not tolerated, and the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church are banned. Religious groups are required to register with the government under the 1966 Societies Act.

Muslim religious teachers must be certified by the Asatizah Recognition Board, a body of religious scholars under the purview of the state's Islamic Religious Council of Singapore. The system is seen as an effort to ensure that only state-approved forms of Islam are taught.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?

1/4

Public schools include a national education component that has been criticized for presenting a history of Singapore that focuses excessively on the role of the PAP. All public universities and political research institutions have direct government links that enable political influence and interference in hiring and firing; recent faculty turnover at two major universities has increased concerns about political pressure. Self-censorship on Singapore-related topics is common among academics, who can face legal and career consequences for critical speech.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other

2/4

| | |
|--|--|
| sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? | |
|--|--|

While there is some space for personal expression and private discussion, legal restrictions on topics that involve race and religion constrain dialogue. The threat of defamation suits and related charges are also deterrents to free speech, including on social media. In November 2019, a judge overseeing a criminal defamation case against the editor of and a contributor to *The Online Citizen* rejected the defendants' argument that the charges were unlawful because the article in question had alleged corruption in the cabinet without identifying any specific person. The ruling effectively allowed defamation charges for criticism of the government in general.

Parliament enacted POFMA in May 2019, and it went into effect in October. The law gives government ministers the authority to identify false online content and order its removal or correction; the measure's criminal penalties include fines and up to a year in prison for failure to comply with removal or correction orders. POFMA was invoked five times before the end of the year, targeting the political opposition as well as a critical blogger.

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 due to growing legal restrictions on free expression, including a law empowering government ministers to suppress online content that they deem false and a court ruling that allowed criminal defamation charges for criticism of the cabinet rather than a particular person.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| E1 0-4 pts | |
| Is there freedom of assembly? | 2/4 |

Public assemblies are subject to extensive restrictions. Police permits are required for assemblies that occur outdoors; limited restrictions apply to indoor gatherings.

Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park is the designated site for open assembly, though events there can likewise be restricted if they are deemed disruptive. Non-Singaporeans are generally prohibited from participating in or attending public assemblies that are considered political or sensitive. A 2017 amendment to the Public Order Act increased the authorities' discretion to ban public meetings and barred foreign nationals from organizing, funding, or even observing gatherings that could be used for a political purpose.

The Public Order and Safety (Special Powers) Act of 2018 granted the home affairs minister and police enhanced authority in the context of a "serious incident," which was vaguely defined to include scenarios ranging from terrorist attacks to peaceful protests. Officials would be permitted to potentially use lethal force and to halt newsgathering and online communications in the affected area. The special powers could even be invoked in advance of a likely or threatened incident.

Activist Jolovan Wham was fined S\$3,200 (US\$2,300) in February 2019 for "organizing an assembly without a permit." He had organized a conference in 2016 that featured a speech via video link by a prodemocracy leader from Hong Kong.

E2 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?

1/4

The Societies Act requires most organizations of more than 10 people to register with the government; the government enjoys full discretion to register or dissolve such groups. Only registered parties and associations may participate in organized political activity. Despite these restrictions, a number of nongovernmental organizations engage in human rights and governance-related work, advocating policy improvements and addressing the interests of constituencies including migrant workers and women. Prominent activists are subject to police questioning, criminal charges, civil lawsuits, and other forms of harassment in reprisal for their work.

E3 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

1/4

Unions are granted some rights under the Trade Unions Act, though restrictions include a ban on government employees joining unions. Union members are prohibited from voting on collective agreements negotiated by union representatives and employers. Strikes must be approved by a majority of members, as opposed to the internationally accepted standard of at least 50 percent of the members who vote. Workers in essential services are required to give 14 days' notice to an employer before striking. In practice, many restrictions are not applied. Nearly all unions are affiliated with the National Trade Union Congress, which is openly allied with the PAP.

F. Rule of Law

F1 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

1/4

The country's top judges are appointed by the president on the advice of the prime minister. The government's consistent success in court cases that have direct implications for its agenda has cast serious doubt on judicial independence. The problem is particularly evident in defamation cases and lawsuits against government opponents. While judgments against the government are rare, the judiciary is perceived to act more professionally and impartially in business-related cases, which has helped to make the country an attractive venue for investment and commerce.

F2 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?

2/4

Defendants in criminal cases enjoy most due process rights; political interference does not occur in a large majority of cases. However, the colonial-era Internal

Security Act (ISA) allows warrantless searches and arrests to preserve national security. ISA detainees can be held without charge or trial for two-year periods that can be renewed indefinitely. In recent years it has primarily been used against suspected Islamist militants. The Criminal Law Act, which is mainly used against suspected members of organized crime groups, similarly allows warrantless arrest and preventive detention for renewable one-year periods. The Misuse of Drugs Act empowers authorities to commit suspected drug users, without trial, to rehabilitation centers for up to three years.

F3 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?

2/4

Singaporeans are largely protected against the illegitimate use of force and are not directly exposed to war or insurgencies. Prisons generally meet international standards. However, the penal code mandates corporal punishment in the form of caning, in addition to imprisonment, for about 30 offenses, and it can also be used as a disciplinary measure in prisons. Singapore continues to impose the death penalty for crimes including drug trafficking. Thirteen people were executed during 2018; complete information on executions during 2019 was not available at year's end.

F4 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

2/4

The law forbids ethnic discrimination, though in some instances minorities may face discrimination in private- or public-sector employment. Women enjoy the same legal rights as men on most issues, and many are well-educated professionals, but no laws protect against gender-based discrimination in employment.

The LGBT+ community faces significant legal obstacles. The penal code criminalizes consensual sex between adult men, setting a penalty of up to two years in prison. The

law is not actively enforced, but the Court of Appeal upheld its constitutionality in 2014. The Pink Dot parade, held annually in support of equal rights for LGBT+ people since 2009, drew another large turnout in 2019, despite the legal ban on foreign funding and participation.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

3/4

Citizens enjoy freedom of movement and the ability to change their place of employment. Policies aimed at fostering ethnic balance in subsidized public housing, in which a majority of Singaporeans live, entail some restrictions on place of residence, but these do not apply to open-market housing. There are practical limits on freedom of movement for foreign workers.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?

3/4

Individuals face no extensive restrictions on property ownership, though public housing units are technically issued on 99-year leases rather than owned outright. While the state is heavily involved in the economy through its investment funds and other assets, private business activity is generally facilitated by a supportive legal framework.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage

partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?

3/4

Men and women generally have equal rights on personal status matters such as marriage and divorce, though same-sex marriage and civil unions are not recognized. Social pressures deter some interreligious marriages and exert influence on personal appearance. The government has generally barred Muslim women from wearing headscarves in public-sector jobs that require a uniform, but the issue remains a subject of public debate, and President Yacob herself wears a headscarf. Spousal immunity from rape charges was eliminated through a penal code amendment adopted by Parliament in May 2019.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?

3/4

Singapore's inhabitants generally benefit from considerable economic opportunity, but some types of workers face disadvantages. The country's roughly 200,000 household workers are excluded from the Employment Act and are regularly exploited. Several high-profile trials of employers in recent years have drawn public attention to the physical abuse of such workers. Laws and regulations governing their working conditions have modestly improved formal protections over the past decade, but the guarantees remain inadequate. In 2018, the Ministry of Manpower issued a new work-permit condition that banned employers from holding the paid wages and other money of foreign household workers for safekeeping. Existing laws such as the Foreign Worker Dormitories Act of 2015 are intended to ensure the food and shelter needs of foreign workers. However, illegal practices such as passport confiscation by employers remain common methods of coercion, and foreign workers are vulnerable to exploitation and debt bondage in the sex trade or industries including construction and manufacturing.





On Singapore

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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

50/100 ■ Partly Free

Internet Freedom Score

56/100 ■ Partly Free

Other Years

2019



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